

July 7, 2008

The Honorable David B. Cohen, Mayor
City Hall
Newton, Massachusetts

Dear Mayor Cohen:

I am pleased to submit the final report of the Newton Centre Task Force. It represents several years of effort by dozens of volunteers who, through their hard work, keen insight and eloquent expression, have demonstrated why Newton is such a special community. The fact that you have chosen to hire four of them away from us only serves to reinforce this point.

What you are receiving are the recommendations of the Task Force. In accordance with the agreements reached part way through the process, there are two different visions. That of Group One is certainly less ambitious than that of the combined efforts of Group Two and Three. Nevertheless, both take a positive and pro-active approach to the urban planning process as it relates to Newton Centre.

These recommendations are supported by hundreds of pages of research and analysis which are in the possession of the Planning Department and represent an important resource in their own right.

In addition the many volunteers, I also want to thank the many members of your administration who provided support, expertise and advice throughout this process. Without their help, this work could not have been completed.

People did not always agree. They did not always disagree agreeably. But the passion with which these difficult issues were engaged is a reflection of how important they are to the Citizens of Newton. I hope that their efforts will receive the consideration that an effort of this magnitude deserves.

Very truly yours,

Charles S. Eisenberg, Chairman
The Newton Centre Task Force

NEWTON CENTRE TASK FORCE REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Before the 1950s, Newton Centre was a vibrant and diverse commercial center. There were places to buy fresh food and produce, like Sage's and Blacker Brothers. There were places to hang out and meet friends. There was even a movie theatre like there is in West Newton. People lived in the Centre, in apartments over the retail stores. And the stately Victorian architecture of the Mason School in the center of the Centre tied the area together both visually and physically. Newton Centre was a place to live, a place to shop and a place to go.

Today, Newton Centre is a very different place. Where the Mason School stood there is a surface parking lot. The retail mix is dominated by banks and beauty salons while many of the more neighborhood-oriented uses have disappeared. The pedestrian environment is decidedly unfriendly and multifamily housing has all but disappeared. One hundred years ago, Newton Centre was the epitome of what is now called Smart Growth and Sustainable Development. Today, many people feel that there is no "there" there.

After two years of studying these issues, in February, 2005 the Newton Economic Development Commission presented Mayor David Cohen with "The Newton Centre Renaissance Report." The report stated that:

"Today, Newton Centre is a ... location for regional banks and selected high-end stores, but lacks the hub, cohesion and pedestrian focus of a true village center. It lacks any central focus: what was once the site of the Mason school was turned into the central triangle parking lot many years ago. There are few residences in the Centre's core and... few pedestrian links to surrounding ...residential properties. The village under serves local residents and lacks the star power to attract new visitors...what once had been a cohesive village has turned into a scattered, single shop destination, regionally-oriented business center. " and concluded that "The time has come for a renaissance of Newton Centre...to initiate a restructuring and rebuilding of the business area of Newton Centre into a vibrant destination and village center."

Amongst a series of substantive recommendations, the Report urged the establishment of an ad hoc committee to review the Report, to study Newton Centre and to make recommendations to the City on a plan to improve and revitalize Newton Centre.

In response to the Report, in April, 2005 Mayor Cohen established the Newton Centre Task Force and charged it to:

- Develop viable options to address the commercial, residential, cultural and transportation needs of Newton Centre.
- Analyze and critique such options in relation to:
 - The delineation of proposed project boundaries
 - Increasing commercial vitality and the commercial tax base in the Centre

- Addressing Newton's housing gap, with additional consideration to senior and affordable units
- Meeting cultural needs in the City of Newton
- Conducting cost/benefit analysis of each option

The original Task Force consisted of twenty members and five alternates representing all the stakeholders in Newton Centre. They were: Charles Eisenberg (Chairman), Jerry Adams, Warren Brown, Raymond Ciccolo, Alderman Victoria Danberg, Kevin Dutt, John Furst, Robert Gifford, Andrew Gottlieb, Jennifer Grams, Vicky Greenstein, William Hagar, Candace Havens, Amanda Heller, Ann Hochberg, Todd Krasnow, Marianne Paley Nadel, Fran Seasholes, Jane Shoplick, David Stein, Andrew Stern, David Zussman, Eve Tapper, Terry Wendt, and Elizabeth Wilkerson.

After an initial meeting, the Task Force was divided into subcommittees to study different areas of interest: design standards, parking demand and traffic flow, zoning regulations, financing alternatives, historic and current uses and case studies of efforts in other communities. For seven months, these subcommittees collected and analyzed information, traveled as far as Illinois and Maryland to conduct research, and solicited the opinions of stakeholders and experts. This effort culminated in a public hearing in late 2005 where each subcommittee (along with the Newton Historical Society) presented its report. At the same time, two surveys were conducted by the Task Force; one of local commercial establishments and one of residents. These reports and a summary of the surveys can found on the City's website at www.ci.newton.ma.us/newtoncentretaskforce/initial-findings.htm

The next step was to hold a series of visioning sessions. Using part of a dedicated \$40,000 grant from the Commonwealth, the City hired Dodson Associates to facilitate this effort and the first session was held on March 26, 2006. At this half-day exercise, the task force was divided into four groups, each of which was given a map of Newton Centre, trace paper and "building blocks." At the end of the session, each group presented its "vision."

The second meeting, to be held on April 5th, was planned as an open exercise so that interested citizens could participate in the visioning process. It was attended by a large number of people, many of who rejected the premise of the Task Force and/or the legitimacy of the process. A subsequent session failed to resolve these differences.

Therefore, in May, 2006, the Chairman proposed and the Task Force agreed to alter the structure and approach of the Task Force effort. Three groups were established representing those who felt no or little change was needed (Group 1), those who believed in "moderate" changes (Group 2), and those who believed that major changes were required (Group 3). Each group was open to any interested Newton citizen or merchant who signed prior to July 1, 2006. It was agreed that each Group would be allowed to prepare its own report and recommendations that would be included in the final Task Force report without substantive alteration.

Between July and December, 2006, these Groups met frequently to develop their plans. During that time, Group Two and Group Three decided to unite and Ron Jonash, the original chairman of Group 1, led an effort to establish areas of consensus between all three groups.

In January, 2007 a meeting was held to update the public. Reports were presented by Group 1 and Group 2/3. In addition, a “Consensus Plan” was presented which primarily focused on changes to the central triangle parking lot. There was also a separate report presented showing the results of several parking and traffic studies undertaken by the Task Force. Since that time, the various Groups have been working on the details of their plans and to prepare their reports.

In the eighteen months since that meeting, the “consensus” has broken down. In part, this was a function of the determination that assumptions concerning the ability to replace parking in the triangle with on street spaces are not feasible. However, a more significant factor was the recognition that critical disagreements could not be reconciled. Therefore, while both Group 1 and Group 2/3 have incorporated elements of the “Consensus Plan” into their reports, there is no consensus between the two groups.

Finally, it is important to note that one charge to each Group has been to present plans that are at least revenue neutral; if not positive.

The Group 1 Report

Group 1 characterizes their approach as “Better, not Bigger.” Group 1 believes in moderate, incremental, sustainable, long-term improvement consistent with village needs and on an appropriate village scale. They believe that Newton Centre is already a smart growth location. They are concerned that any inappropriate development will result in an unacceptable increase in traffic and parking demand. Therefore, Group 1 recommends that the scale and character of Newton Centre be preserved, but that the Centre be improved by implementing a comprehensive pedestrian safety plan along with automobile traffic improvements placed in the context of a beautification program focused on landscaping, under-grounding of utilities, beautifying streets and sidewalks, better signage and lighting, and improved maintenance of all of the above.

To this end, Group 1 recommends the following actions:

1. Enhance the triangle parking area
2. Improve the pedestrian experience
3. Implement traffic calming measures
4. Implement a landscaping and beautification plan
5. Employ a comprehensive parking management plan
6. Establish design guidelines that emphasize historic preservation and conservation

7. Support modest growth within the existing zoning by-laws (no zoning overlay)
8. Encourage the creation of a modest amount of additional housing within the existing height limits, particularly the re-conversion of upper floors and houses to their original residential use

The members of Group 1 were: Carol Birkestrand, John Furst, Lisa Gordon, William Hagar, Amanda Heller, Nancy Honig, Ron Jonash, Adam Maleson, Ruth Neiberg, Alderman Ken Parker, David Putnam, Steve Seiler, Neal Solomon, Polly Sullivan, Gregg Tong, and Carolyn Wong.

The Group 2/3 Report

When the Task Force established multiple planning Groups in July, 2006, there were three. Some months later, Groups Two and Three decided to see if they could agree on a common vision and set of recommendations. This proved more difficult than they may have anticipated, but with the assistance of Phil Herr and others, they succeeded. The Group Two/Three Report is, therefore, a compromise. It is far less ambitious than some members of Group Three would have wished and somewhat more aggressive than some members of Group Two originally were prepared to accept. However, (without in any way prejudging the general public reaction), the Group Two/Three report now represents the recommendations of the majority of Task Force members and stakeholders who chose to actively participate in this planning process.

Group 2/3 believes that the character and quality of Newton Centre has deteriorated over the past fifty years to the point where it now requires significant intervention to restore it to what it could and should be: a lively, vibrant village centre. For Group 2/3, the current Newton Centre has too much traffic, too many undistinguished, single-story buildings, too many “destination” retail locations such as banks and hair salons and too few apartments. And at the center of it all is a barren, lifeless parking lot that discourages pedestrian access, is visually depressing and serves to divide rather than unify Newton Centre.

“Combined Group Two and Three envisions a Newton Centre that will be a model of 21st century development, regaining its historic scale, charm, and character; a community that has a “heart” and a “sense of place. (We) seek to rebuild an interconnected village center with a mix of mutually reinforcing businesses, residences and community facilities.”

The members of Group 2/3 reject the notion that doing nothing is benign. On the contrary, they emphasize that, left to its own devices, the Centre has become something very different from what they and many of their fellow residents would have wanted.

“Rather than to run the risk of standing still or, alternatively, seeing the village center shaped by inappropriate development, (we) hope to guide the growth of

Newton Centre along socially desirable, economically responsible, and environmentally sustainable paths.”

They also believe that Newton needs more housing in smart growth locations; both conventional and affordable. Newton Centre is an ideal location for empty-nesters, young people (particularly those who grew up in Newton) and those who want to lead a more sustainable lifestyle. It has the services, public transportation and infrastructure to support desperately needed affordable and mixed-use developments at a scale that is not overwhelming. For Group 2/3, encouraging the development of rental and for-sale multifamily housing in Newton Centre seems like a win-win; adding life and vitality to the neighborhood while providing a much needed resource for the City.

Group 2/3 is realistic about the constraints and problems in the Centre. They understand that parking and traffic are concerns that cannot be ignored. They recognize that ways must be found to finance public improvements without increasing the City’s financial burden and they acknowledge that means must be found to mitigate the negative impacts attendant to the restoration process.

Finally, Group 2/3 notes that appropriate development in Newton Centre will generate additional net tax revenue. In the current fiscal environment, Newton cannot longer afford the luxury of ignoring this factor. While tax revenue should never be the justification for approving bad developments, it is an added reason to look favorably upon good ones. Group 2/3 believes that the plan they are proposing is not only good for Newton Centre but that it is also good for Newton; and that helping the City as a whole is a legitimate argument to make in advocating for their position.

Based upon these principles, Group 2/3 has developed a detailed plan which is summarized in the following points:

1. Transform, restore and develop the public areas in the Centre
2. Increase the housing stock by up to 150 units, providing opportunities for people of all income levels and ages.
3. Move parking to the periphery of the Centre and consider the development of at least one public garage structure
4. Improve and calm traffic flow through a series of measures
5. Increase the variety of commercial/retail uses, including efforts to attract more neighborhood-oriented and specialty businesses.
6. Improved pedestrian passageways, some lined with retail shops
7. Improve the streetscape and exterior environment by putting utilities underground, widening sidewalks, improving signage and lighting, and providing new landscaping and street furniture.
8. Establish a zoning overlay district to give property owners and developers guidance and constraints while relieving the financial burdens and uncertainty of the existing regulatory process.
9. Assure that all new development and substantial renovation follows the principles of sustainable development.

10. Mitigate the adverse impacts that new construction will inevitably place upon existing residents and commercial tenants.

Amongst the mechanisms that Group 2/3 proposes to achieve these goals are:

1. Establish a Newton Centre Advisory Commission to guide planning and development.
2. Establish a Parking Authority to finance and manage the public garage.
3. Increase the development envelope in selected locations and rationalize the parking and setback requirements to reflect the realities of a village center.
4. Provide incentives to develop housing over ground floor retail.
5. Take advantage of various Federal and State financing tools, particularly the state's Smart Growth Zoning Districts and the District Improvement Financing program.
6. Encourage business and property owners to establish a Business Improvement District to help assure that the revitalized Centre is well maintained.

The members of Group Two/Three were: Jerry Adams, Kay Alexander, Warren Brown, Alderman Victoria Danberg, Kevin Dutt, Rob Gifford, Jennifer Grams, Vicky Greenstein, Candace Havens, Ann Hochberg, Todd Krasnow, Peter Lew, Marianne Paley Nadel, Kumar Nochur, Sean Roche, Fran Seasholes, Jane Shoplick, David Stein, Andrew Stern, Maurya Sullivan, Eve Tapper, Terry Wendt, Elizabeth Wilkinson, Anatole Zuckerman and David Zussman. In addition, Representative Kay Kahn participated in the process and provided input on many issues.

Conclusion

This process has been more difficult and contentious than many of us anticipated. However, it has also been quite extraordinary. The report that follows represents the significant efforts of a large group of dedicated, enthusiastic and highly intelligent volunteers whose collective effort could probably not be duplicated in many other communities. We owe all of them our gratitude and we owe them the serious consideration of this Report by the City of Newton.